

# THROUGH THE SAD HEART

## CHAPTER ONE

The sleek Lear jet cut through the thick white clouds, and just as smoothly the plane began its descent into Athens airport.

On board the airplane, the owner of the Lear accepted a second glass of vintage Perrier champagne and smiled his appreciation at the pretty flight attendant, all of whom had been chosen for their good looks, as well as their efficiency and discretion. The conversations they regularly heard on board were highly secret, often outside the recognised laws of the land, and liable, if repeated to the wrong person, to end badly for the errant stewardess.

Antony Valkaris looked out the window as the plane descended. It was good to be home again even if his stay in Greece this time would be a short one. He had business matters to attend to that needed his personal touch. Whether that touch would be a delicate one or require more force would be decided when he met with the four men he had arranged to be together. They were business associates of his, and as such his trust of them only went so far.

Once it became apparent that someone, one of these four, was skimming money off the top, cheating on him, he had no choice but to take decisive action. No one cheated on Antony Valkaris, and if they did they had to pay the price. And be seen by others to be paying the price in full, so that anyone else who might get ideas of ripping him off, were dissuaded. It was a strategy he had found to work well in the past and he had no reason to doubt it would work well for him now.

The meeting was at the King George Palace luxury hotel in the heart of Athens and Valkaris had asked his staff in London to book him a private meeting room as well as a suite for at least one night. He had old friends in the capital that he would contact if his business went well, and he had no doubts that it would. With his wife safely tucked away in his Belgravia apartment, watching the Olympics night and day no doubt, Valkaris was confident he and his friends would not be short of female company.

He sipped his champagne. Drinking alcohol was not against his religion but it was a vice over which he exercised some restraint. In most things he adopted a modicum of moderation, retaining control of himself because he had learned over the fifty three years of his life that if he did not control things then someone else invariably tried to control him.

It saddened him that the Greece he had known, had grown up in, was changing, and not for the better. The years of taxation laxity, the lavish pension and social payment systems, seemed to be at an end. The Eurozone crisis as the media dubbed it had dragged Greece like a beggar onto the world's financial stage and paraded it naked and humiliated. National debt was on an unprecedented scale and the ability to repay it was non-existing. Where the nation went from here was anyone's guess but Valkaris had sensibly scaled back his business interests in the country, the legal ones at least. Where there was financial chaos there were always opportunities and the less than legal arm of his empire was able to take advantage of confusion to wash itself clean.

The debris of the smoked salmon and brie sandwiches he had eaten earlier still lay on a plate in front of him and he gestured for the same blonde attendant to remove them. She smiled at him, apologised for having left the plate too long, and picked it up. Valkaris reached out and encircled her wrist with his hand.

“What is your name, my dear?”

This was the first flight Zara Masters had taken with the Valkaris Corporation but she had listened intently during the training session and was in no doubt that a huge part of the job specification was pleasing the man in charge. If her instinct at his touch was to shudder

and pull away she exercised her own constrained control and said pleasantly, “Zara, Mr Valkaris.”

“Zara, a lovely name. I haven’t seen you before have I?”

Still bending forward because of the pressure of his hand on her arm, she said, “No, sir. This is my first flight.”

She felt fingers brush her ankle and it took an extreme effort of will not to cry out and pull away. As the fingers danced further up her leg she tensed and was angry at herself for hoping her employer would not notice her fear. She was not a virgin, although her experiences with men were few, and she steeled herself to cope with the invasion of her privacy that was becoming more overt the longer she stood there.

“Lovely legs, Zara,” Valkaris said as his fingers stroked the back of her knee. “You don’t mind that I...you are an attractive girl.”

“Thank you. Shall I clear this plate away?”

As if waking from a trance Valkaris sat back in his upholstered leather seat and holding both hands in the air waved her away. “Of course, take them.”

Once Zara had gone another flight attendant approached Valkaris. “We are beginning the descent now, sir, five minutes or less.” Althea Andreas was a senior flight attendant who had accompanied Valkaris on innumerable business trips.

“That girl.”

“Would you like to meet her later in your suite?”

“That sounds like an excellent idea.”

In the few minutes before landing Valkaris was finalising his plans for the meeting.

“How will you know which of them it is?”

Valkaris looked up to see his second in command standing adjacent to his seat. “I think, George, you will find the captain has asked us to remain seated with seatbelts fastened.”

George Smithson smiled tightly and took the seat opposite his boss. He had been with Antony almost since the beginning. A chance meeting in a hotel in the Maldives had led to a lifetime of, if not friendship, then some semblance of trusted alliance. Smithson earned his place at the right hand during the early years of building the business empire that Valkaris now owned. Trained as an accountant he ensured the taxation and legal affairs were watertight and would pass the scrutiny of even the most efficient government official.

The Valkaris Corporation was a global entity. Business interests in oil, land, utilities, communications, and shipping, were all served by a complicated series of interlocking companies with headquarters in dozens of countries in all the continents and with offices in all the major capitals of the world.

Over the years, as acquisitions expanded the empire, it was inevitable that people became disgruntled. Sacked employees, owners who felt cheated out of their rightful worth, rivals out manoeuvred, all were potential enemies of the Corporation. Smithson’s role evolved into that of trouble shooter. He dealt with the loose ends so that nothing unravelled. If an owner began mouthing off at the low price paid for his business Smithson and his trusted team persuaded the man that silence might well be the best route for him and for the safety of his family, especially his children. What would the man do if your poor wife, daughter, grandchild, were to have an accident on the way home from school one day? If an employee drank too much of his meagre redundancy payment on too much beer and began sounding off in a bar then a fight suddenly began and more than once a man was the victim of a fatal stabbing by persons unknown.

Smithson was well rewarded for his work. He rarely did the jobs hands on these days, but had a team of well trained and trusted men and women who he could dispatch at a moment’s notice anywhere in the world to ensure that the Valkaris name remained without

blemish.

“So,” Smithson said. “Which of them do you think it is?”

Valkaris smiled but the eyes did not join in. “I have my suspicions but you know me well enough, George, to know that I do not jump to conclusions.”

“You agree with me though, that it somehow concerns the English connection?”

Valkaris looked out the window and was pleased to see the green fields and the outlines of buildings as the altitude dropped ready for their landing. As the ground became clearer he could see swimming pools in back gardens, roads with cars and trucks. “We knew it was a risk adding the antiques trade into the mix.”

“Changing bad money into good needs a variety of outlets.”

“I agree, which is why we brought the European antiques businesses into play. But I have my suspicions about the London end.”

Smithson took his turn to look out the window. It already looked too hot for him. Greece in August was not his choice of business destination. “You mean Black.”

“Let us just say that if the meeting concludes that Mr Black has been setting up his own arrangements with one of the Greek consortium I will be less than surprised.”

Smithson breathed deeply. He knew when his employer had made up his mind about something or someone and he would not want to be in the shoes of Simon Black right now.